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Joyce Kilmer: Poems, Essays, and Letters, with a memoir by ROBERT CORTES HOLLIDAY. New York: George H. Doran Company, 1919. 2 vols.

The volumes before us are the revelation of an interesting and in some respects an unusual personality. In the outward events of Joyce Kilmer's life there is nothing to mark him off from thousands of young men of literary talent who find a place for themselves in our great metropolitan dailies. After college courses at Rutgers and Columbia, like many another in search of a living, Kilmer taught school for a season and eventually found his way into journalism, where he stayed till the War called him into the service, which, in August, 1918, was ended gloriously by death in action. It was a short, noble, and happy career, but there have been thousands like it in these two years of war.

It is rather in the inner events of Kilmer's life that we find the unusual and the correspondingly interesting. He joined the Roman Catholic communion at the age of twenty-seven, when most men have either become indifferent to the deeper claims of religion or have for some years become fixed in their religious convictions. In Kilmer's case the conversion went down to the very roots of his nature. He suggests the medieval ascetic so that one believes him when he writes to Father Daly: "I wish I had a stern medieval confessor—the sort of person one reads about in the anti-Catholic books—who would inflict real penances. The saying of Holy Marys and Our Fathers is no penance, it's a delight." He believes completely in the objective value of prayer, as "Prayer has given Rose [who was stricken with infantile paralysis and later died] the almost normal use of one arm and the power to sit up. And prayer will do more." One time he narrowly escaped death by trying to pass in front of a moving train, and he writes thus to Father Daly:

"It may interest you to know that I had received the Blessed Sacrament half an hour before the train struck me, and that to this fact I attribute my escape from death—since at this place where I was struck several men have been killed, being thrown forward and under the wheels, instead of (as I was) to one side." One inference from this remarkable statement is that none of those who were killed had partaken of the Sacrament. It is a specimen of reasoning as penetrating as that in which he held that the South was right in the Civil War because it was invaded! The genuine-

ness of his piety, which is, of course, not a matter of reasoning, is shown by the following words from a letter to Sister Emerentia: "Pray that I may love God more. It seems to me that if I can learn to love God more passionately, more constantly, without distraction, that absolutely nothing else can matter. Except while we are in the trenches I receive Holy Communion every morning, so it ought to be easier for me to attain this object of my prayers. I got Faith, you know, by praying for it. I hope to get Love the same way." And yet this genuine piety does not in any way conflict with certain joys of the flesh, for he says to his wife in a letter from France, "I don't want to be an hour's distance from the Biltmore grill and the Knickerbocker bar." And again to the same person he writes, "Well, here are the merriest, bravest drinking places in the world. If the States go dry, I'm going to bundle all you young critters over here to live—a comfortable, humorous, Catholic country."

Kilmer had a healthy love for all that was excellent in life and art and an utter contempt for all that was false and cheap. He despised the erotic and neurotic poets and artists and had small toleration for patriots at home who made a virtue of meatless and wheatless days. He enjoyed everything he did or he made the best of it, as when he wrote of his office work in France: "This is the pleasantest war I ever attended—nothing to do but fall in, fall out, pound a typewriter 13 hours a day and occasionally hike across France and back carrying a piano. However, I really do enjoy it." And when after two months intriguing to get a job that was not so bullet-proof he was attached to the Regimental Intelligence Section as an observer, the post that later brought him death, he said: "Now I am doing the work I love—and work you may be proud of. None of the drudgery of soldiering, but a double share of glory and thrills." Altogether a fine type of American.

The greater part of the second volume is taken up with letters to intimate friends and relatives, and apart from their furnishing a personal record of his thoughts and doings they are of no special interest to the reading public. Like some advertised articles in the "Lost Column" they have no value except to the owner. They are not particularly witty or wise and do not differ essentially from the letters of many another young man with less talent than Kilmer. They are rather disappointing to one who has read and enjoyed his rollicking narrative in *Holy Ireland*, his playful humor

in *A Bouquet for Jenny*, or his delightful satire in *The Inefficient Library*.

Mr. Holliday's characterization of Kilmer as a "belletristic journalist" is, I should say, more correct than his devoted friend and enthusiastic literary executor perhaps intended. The term denotes a journalist with a talent for *belles-lettres*, who writes poetry on the side, not a poet who has taken up journalism for a living. His poems nearly all suggest good newspaper "copy," even *Main Street* and *Trees*, which he said he could "honestly offer . . . to Our Lady, and ask her to present them, as the faithful work of her poor unskilled craftsman, to her Son." The former poem expresses very pleasantly the idea frequently played up in metropolitan verse, reminiscences of the country town of one's boyhood; all very well of its kind, but not a particularly high kind. *Trees*, according to Mr. Holliday, made Kilmer's reputation, and some of the stanzas are excellent. There is genuine feeling for the beauty of trees in

I think that I shall never see

A poem lovely as a tree; . . .

A tree that looks to God all day,

And lifts her leafy arms to pray; . . .

Upon whose bosom snow has lain;

Who intimately lives with rain.

But what shall we say of this stanza with a figure which surely does not suggest a tree to one's imagination?—

A tree whose hungry mouth is prest

Against the earth's sweet flowing breast;—

or of this one which has a figure which is decidedly unpleasant to a mind with somewhat earthly association?—

A tree that may in summer wear

A nest of robins in her hair.

But, of course, a rime was necessary.

One of the poems most justly praised is *The White Ships and the Red*, memorializing the sinking of the *Lusitania*, though it, too, was newspaper "copy." It voices the deep indignation not merely of the poet but of the nation, and in this is its merit. The other poems do not dig deep into life; they are the work of a man who has had no great experience. His war poems are too near the

event to be a concentration of what he had gone through, an expression of emotion recollected in tranquillity. His *Rouge Bouquet* is good, but there are hundreds just as good and many better. Perhaps if he had lived—and of how many may this be said, Seeger, Brooke, Ledwidge, and the rest—he would have fulfilled his own prophecy: “The only sort of book I care to write about the war is the sort people will read after the war is over! It will be episodic—chaotic, perhaps—no glib tale, no newspaper man’s work—but with God’s help, a work of art.”

And in the end one can but say that the more one reads Kilmer’s poems and letters and occasional pieces the more one admires the man, a fine manly type representing the best element in the A. E. F. There is not a word of complaint, not a note of pessimism, not a sign of fear; just sheer joy in his work and only sympathy for those who could not share his joy. For all this we are grateful to Mr. Holliday, who has executed his trust well.

JAMES W. TUPPER.

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NOTES ON THE METAPHYSICAL POETS

DONNE (1). A very definite allusion to the poetry of John Donne in the first canto of Butler’s *Hudibras* seems hitherto to have escaped the notice of editors of both poets. In Part 1, Canto 1, 649-650, occurs the parenthetical remark,

As we find in sullen writs,
And cross-grained works of modern wits. . . .

The reference is, of course, to Donne’s *Progress of the Soul*, of which the last stanza begins thus:

Who ere thou beest that read’st this sullen Writ,
Which just so much courts thee as thou dost it.¹

It is amusing, by the way, to note the explanation Warburton furnished for Zachary Grey’s edition of *Hudibras*: “*sullen writs*. For Satirical Writings, well expressed, as implying, That such Writers as *Withers*, *Pryn*, and *Vicars* had no more than Ill-nature towards making a Satyrist.”² This is about on Warburton’s usual critical

¹ Grierson’s edition, I, 315.

² Grey’s *Hudibras*, ed. 1772, I, 70.